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THE CRISIS OF THE PEASANT CIVILIZATION

By Henry Beston

Under the changing colors of the European map, and crossing its artificial frontiers like a force of nature, there has persisted since the Bronze Age a European culture which has had an existence apart from politics and institutions. Called by historians of agriculture the "Peasant Civilization", its roots are in the earth, and from the earth-ritual of the farm it derives its way of life and its immemorial beliefs, practices and superstitions. East and west, across the European peninsula, the pattern of the plough changes. But it remains the plough, and villages in Spain and hamlets in Thuringia may celebrate the harvest of the last wheat sheaf with identical observances.

Founded not on laws but on tradition and tenacious custom, this green commonwealth has provided the basis of continuity through what Arnold Toynbee calls "the time of troubles". The crash of the Roman Empire in the West deprived Western knowledge of many great technical processes, but the Peasant Civilization lost none of its gains. The fruits introduced from Asia by the Romans remained a part of European life, and the Middle Ages inherited not only the familiar cereals but also the cultivated strains of the fig, the olive and the vine.

Agriculturally speaking, the Peasant Civilization is divided into two great regions, a Mediterranean province and a Middle European. In the Mediterranean province, autumnal rains and a short, mild winter are followed by a long season of fair weather and a rainless summer which ripens to perfection such fruits as the various types of olive. The agricultural year is long and busy; not much is required in the way of implements and the agricultural economy of the region, when in health, is one of small holdings. This fact was well recognized in pre-war Italy, and the natural tendency given recognition in law.

Beyond the Alps and north of this agriculture of Ceres and Bacchus lies the other great tower and fortress of the Peasant Culture. Its seat is the great belt of farming land which extends from France through rustic Germany toward the outposts of the Slavs. Here a summer with

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both sunshine and rain makes possible an agriculture more varied than the Mediterranean, and a temperate but genuine winter provides a year richer in human experience.

The Peasant Civilization has survived not only a twilight of culture, but also 15 patchwork centuries of invasions, massacres, burnings, pillage and shifts of sovereignty. Today, for the first time in Western history, it is being deliberately and directly attacked on a wide front. This attack is directed at the ultimate base of European civilization and society.

II

In previous wars and social upheavals, when the Peasant Civilization was involved in carnage, the farmer was either left for dead; hanged from a tree; or suffered to carry on somehow once soldiery had sacked the farm. There was no suggestion from the marauders that his agricultural tradition was worthless, his customs imbecile and himself a fool whose whole class should be liquidated. Unbedevilled by any such attack on the fortress of its emotional and cultural tradition, the peasantry of the past -- excepting the relatively few individuals who were butchered -- were always able to get things going again. The timeless bond between man, life and the earth was never broken.

Today the Peasant Civilization -- where it exists east of the iron curtain -- is helplessly caught in the toils of a social revolution whose intellectual origins are entirely urban. To this new order ancient customs are so much ignorant nonsense; the old agricultural tradition a nuisance; and a brutal and "efficient" mechanizing of all farm life is the answer of the planners to all farm problems. The protagonists of this mechanized and industrialized agriculture apparently do not see that the old farming could face almost anything and carry on, while gasoline agriculture must live or die with the machine age.

Were the Peasant Civilization strong, it could face the program. But the Peasant Civilization of Europe is now pitifully weak. Not only has the secular and urban culture of the age been working against it for a hundred years, bringing its customs and traditions into question and even into ridicule, but the peasantry has also suffered the greatest bloodletting of its history. All over Europe, in two unspeakably imbecile wars, the young men of the farms have been wiped out. Farms have gone out of cultivation because of the death of all the sons, and after World War I the cities attracted many young men from the fields.

Culturally and biologically weakened, the Peasant Civilization was able to hold the inner fortress till this last war. There were even

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signs in certain areas of Europe of a revival of strength. That "who plants, prays, and who sows the seed speaks forth a hope" was not forgotten by the hearth nor in the fields.

III

There is plenty of first-hand information about the present condition of the Peasant Kingdom in post-war Europe. A resumé of it might be thus set down.

Holland is making a particularly good recovery. In France things are not going so well. World War I was a mass-murder of the French peasantry, and what there was left of the Peasant Civilization never recovered its heart. A special result of this peasant destruction was an urbanization of the mind of France. The peasantry remains, but its politics are a part of the urban political world, led by urban leaders. Such great French farms as Flaubert described have simply melted away. As a French farmer-scholar said to the writer, "Our farms have lost both their men and their sense of poetry, yet I feel that the earth of France will save us".

In the British and American zones of occupied Germany, the farm is at least feeding its own people. But throughout Germany the slaughter of the peasantry has been greater than in most other countries, and many of those still living are working as prisoners for the victors.

Every agricultural observer reports Poland as being the worst agricultural ruin. The landed gentry, who were both farmers and soldiers, have been liquidated; farm buildings and farm equipment are in ruin and have been looted coming and going; and several hundred thousand young men of peasant stock are unwilling to return to Poland under its present government. In many places a "farm" is but a hole in the earth covered by boards, and a few desperate people trying to raise potatoes. That Poland still has a Peasant Party is indeed a tribute to its courage and vitality.

Italian agriculture is living from hand to mouth. The great rhythm of Mediterranean agriculture based on the long Mediterranean year has not yet re-established itself, and cannot do so under present political tension and uncertainty. The same applies to Greece.

East of the iron curtain, in Hungary, the German Marches, the Baltic and Balkan States, the Peasant Civilization is confronted by the agricultural theory of the Marxist economy. The great estates have been divided, and their owners are usually "missing". Whatever one thinks of the estate system, its downfall has broken up a functioning economy. The new farms possess too little acreage for successful agri-

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culture, even on the subsistence level. Therefore, many fear an introduction of the collective-farming technique when the time is ripe.

IV

Will the Peasant Civilization of Europe survive? The outlook is not encouraging, for the green kingdom is cut in halves by an abrupt political division which marks as well a radical difference in agricultural policy.

From France to the Ukraine, the farms are in ruin, and the young men either uprooted, dead or in slavery. The farm tenacity of life is very great, but it can lose heart. And once it loses heart, the time is not distant when the roof will have fallen in and the hearth grown cold. The Lombard invasions, entering Northern Italy in the Sixth Century, found the region a country of deserted farms "long in ruin".

If the peasant economy survives, it will survive as subsistence farming amid the ruins of Western Civilization. Such a condition marks not only the starvation, and therefore the passing, of the cities but also the descent of the farmer to almost animal desperation. For Europe those developments foreshadow the return of the Dark Ages. Its night will come when both the cities are gone and the farms are gone, and there is neither a city civilization nor a folk culture. It is a pity that those who ordered the murdering of the great cities of Europe did not possess a little more historical perspective.

The world cannot afford to lose what it would seem to have lost. We live in an increasingly urbanized civilization, and such a civilization, based on the city, is concerned with sensations rather than with realities. The city has no true sense of time or historical continuity, and its artificialities permit little awareness of Nature. Such an awareness is the root of the sense of reality, just as the earth is the ultimate source of feeling. The result of unbalanced urbanization is Cloud-Cuckoo-Land, destitute both of the reason and the warmth of human understanding. Believers in Cloud-Cuckoo-Land stop at nothing.

It is the historical function of a country population and a country way of life not only to grow food but also to supply a nation with a certain grim common sense. Though the Peasant Civilization is gone, a remnant of the peasantry is still with us. And if we wish to keep even what we have, we will do well to realize that it is not the Science of the Atomic Bomb which lies between us and a new Dark Age, but simply "the poor crooked scythe and spade".

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Not Merely Gossip *A Supplement to* Human Events VOL. III, NO. 34

By Frank C. Hanighen August 21, 1946

The most important event in domestic politics during the past week was the defeat of Senator La Follette in the Wisconsin primaries -- a loss to the Senate deplored by colleagues of both parties. The Wisconsin result has significance as a blow, perhaps a fatal blow, to the continued existence of the Midwest Progressive tradition, long symbolized by the elder Senator La Follette, of the Bull Moose days and the 1924 campaign, and his two sons, former Governor Philip La Follette and the recently defeated Senator R. M. La Follette, Jr. But additionally the election in Wisconsin underlines a new, developing pattern in American politics which appeared clearly a few weeks ago in the defeat of Senator Wheeler of Montana.

La Follette was beaten by two forces: (1) the conservative Republican organization in Wisconsin; and (2) the CIO-PAC organization, guided by the Communists. (Similarly, Wheeler was defeated by copper interests and by the same Communist-PAC organization.) This elimination of a "center" party figure, by both conservative and radical elements was a familiar phenomenon in Europe during the critical period when National Socialism was taking hold, and is a considerable threat today both in Europe and the United States.

In the case of La Follette's downfall, the CIO-PAC was the decisive factor. Analysis of the election results shows that the Senator would have prevailed over the conservative opponent, if he had not been opposed by the so-called Left. It was Labor votes in Milwaukee which provided the thin margin of defeat. Now La Follette, according to the standards of any labor union lobbyist in Washington, had such a "perfect Labor record" that the CIO-PAC did not dare oppose him on this score. Their successful strategy was to support the unopposed Democratic candidate, Professor Howard McMurray, whose foreign policy attitudes were agreeable to the Communists directing the CIO-PAC. La Follette had offended the Communists by strongly attacking Soviet Russia's foreign policy. Accordingly, this CIO-PAC support of the Democrat diverted from La Follette many thousands of Labor votes which he had always received in the past.

The Daily Worker (August 16) with disarming frankness makes this picture clear. "The two main reasons for La Follette's defeat were: first, the standing of CIO and prominent AFL leaders in refusing to endorse La Follette despite all pressure; and secondly, the correct emphasis of McMurray's campaign for Democratic senatorial nomination in attacking La Follette's foreign policy and countering La Follette red-baiting and anti-Sovietism." Only those who are familiar with Communist terminology can appreciate the full meaning of the word "correct". McMurray obviously had the "correct" line, as laid down by the Communist strategists. Further evidence of the Communist strategy appeared in the defeat of Thad F. Wasielewski, of Milwaukee, in the Democratic primaries. Wasielewski was one of the Polish-American Congressmen who was critical of Russian policies and distinctly did not bow to the party line.

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With the Yugoslav Government acting belligerently, the British have been taking no chances and have made the following plans for countering any threat to Trieste's proposed "internationalized" status from Marshal Tito's forces: (1) British forces now in Venezia Guilia will be withdrawn to adjoining Carinthia, in the British occupied zone of Austria. They will thus be within striking distance of Trieste in case Tito and the Communists attempt forcibly to incorporate that area into Yugoslavia. (2) The British have asked the United States to provide first-rate military equipment for eight Italian divisions. Apparently, the British count on an Italian army

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as an ally in any such embroilment. (3) The 150,000 Poles are still in Northern Italy and little is heard of earlier British talk about transferring them to England. Some time ago, Britain requested American shipping for this task. Recently the request was withdrawn.

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It is not an entirely well concealed secret in official Washington that the Jewish Agency has accepted the principle of partition, or federalization, of Palestine, as proposed by the British Government. It may be some time before the Agency will publicly admit this, or it may never do so. As a result of the Agency's volte-face, some Zionist groups are displaying a conciliatory attitude toward the British plan. Other Zionist groups remain recalcitrant, perhaps because they have not been informed of the Agency stand; still others will undoubtedly be "bitter enders". American officials are somewhat optimistic, believing that the worst corner has been turned.

On the other hand, British sources are not optimistic. They have expected the United States to take a large number of Jewish refugees from Europe, thereby relieving the pressure on Palestine. President Truman's announcement on August 16 that he would ask Congress to permit the immigration of an unstated number of displaced persons, including Jews, in addition to those on regular immigration quotas, is probably part of a behind-the-scenes understanding with the British. The latter, however, note that the President will only "ask" Congress for such relaxation of immigration regulations; and that there is little likelihood that Congress will agree. Spot reactions from members of Congress on the President's proposal appear to confirm the British view. It is also recalled that President Roosevelt sought to drive through somewhat similar legislation in November, 1942, and failed because of strong Congressional opposition.

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Russia's demand that Turkey surrender control of the Dardanelles is not an immediate threat to peace, but may be a feint in a broader Middle Eastern strategy, in the opinion of military observers. Russia, it is thought, is not inclined to press demands on Turkey to the point of hostilities, because Russia does not at present want a general war. A general war, it is believed, would surely result if Russia attacked Turkey. No, say these military experts, the Russian threat today is perhaps less to Turkey than to the Persian Gulf.

Reports from that area indicate a renewed tussle for the complete control of Iran. Britain has moved reinforcements to the Persian Gulf area, apparently as a threat to Russian agitators who have called strikes in the Anglo-Persian Oil Company fields in Southern Iran. Russia for its part is reportedly massing troops on the borders of Northern Iran.

The fact is that Russia, while largely dominating Iran, has fallen short of complete control. The "autonomous" Azerbaijan republic in Northern Iran is well under Russian yoke; and the Iranian Government in Tehran has had to accept members of the Russian fifth column, the Tudeh Party, into the Cabinet. But Premier Quavam still displays sparks of independence and a tendency to play both ends against the middle. Moscow therefore pretends interest in Turkey, while renewing the process of consolidating her rule in Iran -- evidently on the assumption that Britain is bluffing about intervention in the southern Iranian oil fields, and that a general war will not ensue. Be that as it may, the UN has apparently not heard the last of the recently dormant Iranian question.

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Following swiftly on the heels of the overthrow and savage murder of Bolivian President Villaroel by revolutionary elements, the State Department has announced recognition of the Government formed by those revolutionaries. On the surface, this

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Notes and Quotes

The late President Roosevelt was not the "progressive" which his adulators paint him. A number of reforms were stubbornly opposed by him, as sharp observers with retentive memories can testify. The myth of "Roosevelt the Progressive", is apparently the target of Labor, organ of railway unions, in the following editorial comment on the 1933 fight for the Federal insurance bank deposit bill: "President Roosevelt was cool to it. The then Secretary of the Treasury said it was 'unwise'.

"Fortunately, Congressman 'Bob' Crosser of Cleveland . . .headed a group which went to the White House and pleaded with the President not to actively oppose the deposit insurance bill. . . . 'I'll not oppose it, but it's not an Administration measure', he told Crosser. So the measure went through the House and Vandenberg of Michigan helped a lot in putting it through the Senate. The bankers continued to wag their heads and predict disaster. However, today bank deposit insurance is as firmly established as the Rock of Gibraltar. Bryan's dream has come true, thanks to 'Bob' Crosser and a few other Progressives, who didn't believe the Republic would be ruined if a poor man's savings were protected by Uncle Sam."

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The witty Aneurin Bevan over a year ago, in the Labor Party's election campaign, threw the following charge at the Conservatives: "Our island is almost made of coal and surrounded by fish. Only an organizing genius could produce a shortage of coal and fish at the same time in Great Britain." Today, with a shortage of both coal and fish in the country, Conservatives are tossing this epigram back at the Socialist Government.

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A member of the heroic German Underground during the past war writes a disturbing, but not surprising, letter from Europe: "There is little hope that the acts of the 20th of July and other attempts of revolt against Hitler will be understood and appreciated inside Germany. On the contrary: clandestine voices are already being raised to blame us resisters for the present frightful misery. . . .

"I don't believe that National Socialism will ever revive. But it is very easy to change the word socialism to communism and such a development is quite possible. Aside from the hypocritical attitude of the victors which might lead the desperate and hopeless German people to extreme actions, there are practical considerations which favor such a step. There is first of all the fateful concept of the 'collective guilt' of the German people which, it is said, is used by the Democracies as a moral pretext to decimate the German population. The real reason, it is said, why the Democracies favor decimation of the German people, is the overproduction which threatens the big capitalist countries and which makes them fear the potent German labor market. Such an argument quite automatically directs the attention to the one power whose propaganda has kept aloof from the slogan of collective guilt and whose needs are such that they preclude considerations of overpopulation and competition for generations. At the same time this Power, Russia, makes favorable offers to the educated classes whose living standards don't differ from the workers' anyway and who necessarily grasp at the chance of overcoming the paralyzing process of denazification by joining the Communist Party. But the strongest point of attraction . . . is what is thought to be the overwhelming strength of Russia, as pictured in the local German papers. . . . One can't expect people so harrassed and humiliated to summon enough idealism to align with the presumably weaker party, even if their inclination should tempt them to do so."

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looks like a reversion to the old United States doctrine of non-intervention and automatic recognition of de facto foreign governments. Jefferson gave sanction to this policy when he said: "We surely cannot deny to any nation the right whereon our own government is founded, that every one may govern itself according to whatever forms it pleases, and change those forms at its own will." With the exception of Seward's policy during the Civil War, the United States conformed to this conception in its foreign policy very closely down to the time of Woodrow Wilson, when there commenced the policy of recognizing only those governments which met with approval in Washington. The recent Braden policy has been an extreme example of this diplomatic course.

Capitol observers are not sure that the recognition of the new Bolivian Government is actually a return to traditional recognition and non-intervention policy. They contrast the promptitude with which the present Government in La Paz was recognized with the delays attendant on the recognition of Villaroel when he seized power in 1943. It is no secret that the State Department did not like the character of the Villaroel Government and does look with favor on that of the present Government. The Department probably continues to regard "good behavior" (according to its own lights) as more essential than "good neighbor".

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As the Chinese Communists on August 18 declared all-out warfare on the Chinese Nationalist Government, it was rumored that General Marshall was still trying to put pressure on Chiang Kai-shek further to appease the Communists. Apparently, the American emissary even at that late date failed to realize that his policy in China has been highly partial to the Communists and dangerously unfair to the Nationalist cause.

Marshall on his arrival in China prevailed on the Generalissimo to make a political agreement with the Communists before a military agreement was reached. The Nationalist leader thereby made a great concession, because he waived the basic condition, to which he had adhered for many years, that no political settlement with the Communists could be accepted before a military settlement had been reached, involving the integration of the Communist armed forces into the National Army. In the pact of last January, Chiang agreed to the establishment of a coalition government, convocation of a National Assembly and a new constitution, with full democratic rights for all parties.

The Nationalist Government by and large adhered to its part of the bargain. It permitted freedom of speech, press and assembly; allowed Communists to set up party headquarters in various cities under Nationalist control; let Communists publish newspapers and sell propaganda literature on bookstalls, etc. Communists flocked to these areas and pursued their usual practice of infiltrating student and labor organizations. Danger of Communist-sponsored uprisings grew and on several occasions -- which were the exception rather than the rule -- the Nationalist Government raided Communist headquarters and publishing offices. Each raid was, of course, followed by protests from Communists both in China and in the United States, against what they called "fascist" measures.

Meanwhile, Red "fascism" held sway in the areas controlled by Communists -- undeterred by General Marshall. The Communist authorities permitted not a single Nationalist newspaper to be published under their regime; not a single organized opposition party or group to exist. No Nationalist has been able to enter Communist China without risk of imprisonment or execution. In short, the Marshall policy has been a one-way street: the Communists have made no concessions to democracy, while their fifth column in Nationalist territory has utilized democratic freedoms to try to undermine the Nationalist regime. When Chiang finally stood firm against Marshall's pressure for further appeasement and insisted on a military agreement with the Communists, the Communists saw that they had nothing more to gain from Marshall's intercession -- and openly renewed civil war.

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